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TRANSLATION

Yuki no yo no banashi

A SNOWY NIGHT'S TALE

BY DAZAI OSAMU

Translated by T. E. SWANN

THAT day the snow had fallen since morning. Since I had finished the *mompē*¹ which I had started previously for my niece, Otsuruchan, I called at the house of my aunt in Nakano to deliver them on the way home from school that day. I then received a couple of dried cuttlefish from them as a present. It was already dark when I arrived at Kichijōji Station. The snow had piled up over a foot deep and it continued to fall silently. Since I was wearing boots I felt rather bold, and walked along purposefully picking out places where the snow was piled deeply. Coming up to the mailbox near the house, I noticed that the newspaper-wrapped cuttlefish I had held under my arm were missing. Though I am a model of an easy-going person, nevertheless, I rarely drop things. Yet that night, probably because of my excited romping in the drifted snow, I had dropped them. I was crestfallen. I was disgusted at losing the cuttlefish and embarrassed by my petty reaction, but, still, I had intended to give them to my sister-in-law. Next summer my sister-in-law will have a baby. They say one is very hungry while carrying a baby. She must eat a double amount of food for the baby in her stomach. Because my sister-in-law, in contrast to me, is refined and careful about her appearance, she took such light meals that they seemed like "canary's fare." Although she never once ate between meals, of late she would say it was embarrassing to be hungry. She said that she would suddenly start wanting to eat odd things. I had not forgotten that my sister-in-law, while cleaning up after the evening meal with me recently, fretted and sighed in a small voice, "Oh, my mouth is bitter. I wish I had a cuttlefish or something else to suck on." Therefore, having chanced to receive a couple of cuttlefish from my aunt

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¹ A type of baggy trousers worn by women.

in Nakano that day, I happily brought them along to give them to her secretly. But now I had dropped them. I was crestfallen.

As you may know, there are three people in my family—my older brother, my sister-in-law, and me. Moreover, my brother is a slightly eccentric novelist, and although he is already nearing forty, he is not at all famous. And he is always in financial straits. Whether asleep or awake he will say that his health is bad—only his manner of speaking is healthy. He grumbles noisily at us for this and that. Furthermore, because he will not help at all in family matters, except for mere gripping, my sister-in-law has to do the physical work of a man. I feel very sorry for her.

One day I became indignant and said to him, "Please take your rucksack once in a while and go and buy vegetables. Other husbands generally seem to do this." He got very mad and said, "Idiot! I am not so vulgar a man as that. Listen, Kimiko (my sister-in-law's name), you bear this in mind too: Even if our household begins to starve to death, I will never go out for such shameful food hunting. Understand that! That is my last bit of pride."

Indeed, his resolution was fine. However, I do not know at all whether my elder brother thought of our country's cause and therein hated the food-hunting parties, or merely hated food-hunting because of his own laziness. Both my mother and father were Tokyo people, but my father had served for a long time in the government office of Yamagata in Tōhoku. My brother and I were born in Yamagata and our father died in Yamagata. My brother was about twenty then and I was still only a baby riding on my mother's back. The three of us returned to Tokyo again, and a few years ago Mother died. Our family was now composed of my brother, his wife, and me. Since we had no relatives we did not receive any food shipped in from the country, as people in other homes did. Also, because my brother was an eccentric person, and because he did not associate at all with other people, there were absolutely no unusual or unexpected gifts. When I realized what joy it would have caused if I had only given the two cuttlefish to my sister-in-law, the two cuttlefish became precious to me, even though they were such petty things. So I about-faced and slowly walked along, searching the snowy road I had been over. But there was no hope of finding them. Not only would it have been very hard to see the white newspaper wrapper on the white snowy road, but the snow was piling up continually. I went back almost as far as Kichijōji Station, but I didn't find so much as a rock. When I shifted my grip on my umbrella with a sigh and looked up at the dark night sky, the snow danced furiously like a million fireflies. Beautiful, I thought. Branches that seemed heavy and covered with snow hung down from the trees on both sides of the road. Now and then they weakly wriggled around as if they were

sighing. Feeling, so to speak, as if I were in a fairy-tale world, I forgot about the cuttlefish. Suddenly, a bright idea occurred to me. I would take some of this beautiful snow scenery to my sister-in-law. It would certainly be a much better present than cuttlefish. To be obsessed with food is vulgar. Actually, it is disgraceful.

My brother once taught me that human eyes can store up scenery. If you stare at a light bulb for a little while and then close your eyes, the light bulb will appear vividly behind your eyelids. That was adequate proof. In connection with this, my brother had told me a short, romantic story set in ancient Denmark,—but my brother's stories are never more than wild tales. Although they are completely unreliable, still I thought the story he told that time was a pretty good one even though it was a tissue of my brother's lies. This was his story:

"Long ago, a certain doctor in Denmark performed an autopsy on the corpse of a young sailor who had been shipwrecked. Examining the sailor's eyes under a microscope, he discovered a beautiful scene of a happy family transcribed on his retina. The doctor reported this to a friend of his who was a novelist, and the novelist immediately gave the following explanation of this strange phenomenon. The young sailor, engulfed in the raging billows that had shipwrecked him, struck out for shore. Finally, he managed to cling desperately to a window frame of a lighthouse. When he looked in the window as he was about to call out for help, the lighthouse keeper's family was just about to begin their modest, cheerful evening meal. Ah, that won't do, he thought. As he realized that the family's happiness would be ruined if he now screamed for help, a big wave suddenly struck again. At the same moment the strength failed in his fingertips as he clung to the window frame. The sailor's body was carried out to sea. Surely this sailor was the most kind and noble person in the world. Such was the novelist's explanation. The doctor gave his assent to this interpretation, and the story has it that the two of them reverently buried the sailor's corpse."

I wanted to believe this story. Even though it was a story that could not be scientific, I still wanted to believe it. Having suddenly recalled this story in the snowy night, I transcribed the beautiful snow scenery in the bottom of my eyes and returned home.

I thought I would say something like, "Nēsan, please peek into my eyes and the baby you are carrying will become beautiful." The other day my sister-in-law had laughingly asked my brother, "Please paste a picture of a handsome person on the wall of my room. I will look at it every day and no doubt bear a beautiful child." My brother nodded gravely, "Hmm, prenatal influence? That is important." He was kind enough to stick two photographs side by side on the wall—a photograph

of a charming noh mask called "Magojirō" and a photograph of a tiny noh mask called "Yuki no Ko-omote". But after that he also stuck a picture of his own sullen face right between the photographs of the two noh masks, so that they came to nothing.

Even my meek sister-in-law was no longer able to tolerate his picture and begged, "It is my earnest request that you take down your picture. When I look at it I get upset." Finally, she got him to take it down. But, if she had continued to gaze at his picture, there is no doubt that the baby would have been born with a face like that of a young monkey. My brother has that sort of an odd face. Even so, I wonder if he doesn't think he was rather handsome as a child. He is a shocking person. Actually, my sister-in-law said she believed that she wanted to look only at the most beautiful things in the world now, for the sake of the baby she carried. Undoubtedly, transcribing this snow scenery in the bottom of my eyes would bring my sister-in-law infinitely more joy when I showed it to her than a present of such a thing as cuttlefish.

Giving up the cuttlefish for lost, I stared at the beautiful, surrounding snow-scene as much as possible on the way home. I arrived home with the feeling that I carried the beautiful, pure white scenery not only in the bottom of my eyes but even in the bottom of my heart.

"Nesan, look into my eyes. At the bottom of my eyes some very beautiful snow scenery is transcribed in full."

"What? What do you mean?" Laughing, my sister-in-law stood up and put her hands on my shoulders, "What on earth happened to your eyes?"

"Well, didn't my brother once teach us that the scenery one has just seen will remain at the bottom of a person's eyes without fading away?"

"I had forgotten your brother's stories. They are mostly lies."

"Well, that one story is true. I want to believe that one, so please look into my eyes. When I was coming home just now, I saw a whole lot of very beautiful snow scenery. Look into my eyes. You will surely have a beautiful baby with skin like snow."

My sister-in-law made a face that seemed sad and was silently gazing at my face. Then, "Hey,"—my brother came out of the adjoining room. "The effect would be a hundred times better if you looked into my eyes rather than looking into Shunko's worthless eyes."

"Why? Why?" I despised my brother enough to want to hit him. "When she looks into your eyes she says she gets sick."

"That can't be true. My eyes saw beautiful snow scenery for twenty years.

I was in Yamagata until I was about twenty. Shunko, you see, had already come to Tokyo before she was able to discriminate things and she doesn't know the splendid snow scenery of Yamagata. So she makes a fuss about seeing this pitiful Tokyo snow scenery. Since my eyes have seen so much snow scenery that they have become sick of it, they are better than Shunko's eyes—no matter what you say."

I felt like crying to make him regret that. Then my sister-in-law came to my aid. She smiled and quietly said, "Well, his eyes have seen dirty things as often as they have seen snow scenery, haven't they?"

"True, True. There are far more negative scenes than positive ones, so they are yellow and muddy."

"You are talking out of your conceit!" My brother got mad and went back into the adjoining room.